

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2002, Mark Warner, governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, issued an executive order establishing the Virginia Economic Strike Force. This working group of state-agency representatives, chaired by the Virginia Secretary of Commerce and Trade, was charged with addressing the economic crisis faced by several Virginia communities that were losing large numbers of jobs, primarily in the textile and furniture-manufacturing industries.⁴ The Strike Force was directed to provide a single point of contact for dislocated workers and other affected citizens, assist communities in developing strategies to address their economic problems, and identify opportunities for economic development.

Governor Warner directed the Strike Force to establish Coordinated Economic Relief Centers (CERCs) in affected communities to serve as the single point of contact for dislocated workers, their families, and other low-income members of the community. During a press conference held in Clarksville, Virginia, to announce the deployment of the Strike Force and to announce plans to open a CERC in Clarksville, Governor Warner provided his rationale for establishing the CERCs to serve dislocated workers: “It is important that these individuals and their families have access to the full spectrum of services, both public and private, through a single intake process.” According to state officials, the CERCs are modeled on the approach of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which sets up temporary service centers in which people affected by natural disasters and other emergencies can access a range of federal and state services.

⁴The Strike Force includes representatives from the Departments of Social Services, Education, Agriculture and Consumer Services, Business Assistance, Housing and Community Development, Labor and Industry, Medical Assistance Services, and Minority Business Enterprise, the Virginia Community College System, the Virginia Employment Commission, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, and the Virginia Tourism Authority.

To date, the Strike Force has established CERCs in four communities. The first, in Clarksville (Mecklenburg County), opened on March 12, 2002, about six weeks after Governor Warner issued the executive order. The Martinsville CERC opened on March 15 to serve the city of Martinsville, as well as Henry and Patrick counties. The third CERC, located in South Boston, opened on April 12 to serve residents of Halifax County. The fourth CERC was established in Marion on June 10 to serve residents of Smyth County.

THE STUDY ON PROMOTING ACCESS TO THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM AND OTHER WORK SUPPORTS THROUGH COORDINATED ECONOMIC RELIEF CENTERS

This report describes the results of a study of the CERCs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. The purpose of the study was to learn about the CERCs' implementation and to assess their potential for increasing low-income families' access to the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and other work supports, such as medical coverage, child care assistance, and transportation assistance. In recent years, policymakers and program administrators have become increasingly concerned about declines in participation in the FSP and other work support programs, especially among former recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and their children. Consequently, interest has grown in identifying promising strategies for improving low-income families' access to, and participation in, the FSP and other work supports. States have begun to implement and test such strategies as community outreach campaigns and streamlined application procedures, both designed to increase families' access to these work supports and to encourage their participation (Pavetti et al. 2002).

Virginia's initiative to establish the CERCs provides a unique and timely opportunity to examine whether One-Stop service centers, in which a broad range of services are co-located, offer another promising strategy for increasing low-income families' participation in the FSP and other work supports. As a result of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), One-Stop career centers have proliferated in recent years. The WIA consolidated numerous federal employment and training programs and required states and localities to provide most federally funded employment services through One-Stop career centers. A guiding principle for this system is to provide universal access to services, so that anyone seeking employment or career advancement can obtain core employment services through the One-Stop system. In addition, creation of this system has increased interest in—and created new opportunities for—coordination between the welfare and workforce development systems. Recent research indicates that the level of collaboration between these two systems has grown substantially (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002a).

In the rest of this introductory chapter, we present the study's research questions and methodology. Chapters II and III provide important background and information that set the stage for the study's findings. Chapter II synthesizes findings from several recent studies

of service integration through One-Stops and strategies for increasing access to food stamps and other work supports. In Chapter III, we describe the communities in which the CERCs have been implemented; our description includes a time line of plant closings, data on unemployment rates, and a profile of dislocated workers. Chapter IV describes CERC planning efforts at the state and local levels. Chapter V describes CERC implementation and the services provided, and Chapter VI presents data on the levels and patterns of service use. In Chapter VII, we present findings on the CERCs' successes and implementation challenges and then describe a number of implementation lessons that can be derived from the study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key goals of this study are to gain a detailed understanding of how the CERCs have been implemented and how they operate, assess their potential to increase participation in the FSP and other work supports, and glean implementation lessons from the CERCs' experience that will be useful to policymakers and program operators seeking to design and implement similar strategies. The study's research questions reflect these goals. Specifically, the study is designed to answer the following key questions:

- *How do the CERCs deliver food assistance and other work supports, and to what extent are these services integrated with other services provided at the CERCs?* How are the CERCs organized? How are cases managed? How are the CERCs funded? How do they facilitate communication across participating public agencies? What is the nature of their relationship with employers? Do the CERCs conduct community outreach? Do nongovernmental food assistance organizations participate in the CERCs?
- *What are the levels of service and program receipt participation in the CERC communities?* How did the levels of participation change in the FSP, TANF, and other assistance programs after the CERCs opened?
- *What lessons can be drawn from Virginia's experience operating the CERCs?* What successes and failures did the CERCs experience? Do they have sufficient resources to meet their goals? Do they represent a model that shows promise, and one that could be replicated? What implementation lessons can be drawn from the experience with CERCs?

METHODOLOGY

This study is a process study designed to learn about CERC implementation and to glean implementation lessons that can be useful to future initiatives. We used a case study approach as our primary research method for gathering and analyzing qualitative information on CERC implementation. We supplemented the qualitative information with a brief literature review to provide context for the study, and with an analysis of service use data. In this section, we describe our methods for these three study components.

Case Studies

Much of the data collection for this study occurred during intensive site visits to each of the four CERCs.⁵ Each visit, conducted by a team of two researchers, included individual interviews, small group discussions, observations of service delivery, and reviews of program documents relevant to CERC operations. In each site, we conducted individual interviews and group discussions with CERC administrators, CERC line staff, administrators from DSS, and representatives of partnering agencies that participated in the CERCs (Table I.1). In some sites, we also conducted interviews with local government officials and CERC customers. After the visits, telephone interviews were conducted with a few respondents who were not available when we were on site.

Prior to the visits, we developed prototype interview protocols. We adapted them as necessary to address variations across the CERCs and communities. (The prototype protocols are included in Appendix A.) Discussions with administrators focused on CERC organization, operations, funding, approach to case management, and coordination across programs. The discussions also explored respondents' perceptions of the CERCs' successes, the challenges to coordinating across systems, and the strategies CERCs have developed to overcome such hurdles. Interviews with CERCs and partnering agency line staff focused on their experiences delivering services through the CERCs and coordinating services across programs, and on their approach to helping customers access the services they need.

After completing the site visits, we conducted a series of telephone interviews with state-level officials from the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) and the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS).⁶ These interviews focused on the state's rationale for establishing the CERCs, goals for the CERCs, state policies related to CERC implementation, perceptions of the CERCs' key successes and implementation challenges, lessons learned from designing and implementing the CERCs, and any other state-level issues that surfaced during the site visits. (Appendix B contains our protocol for state-level interviews.)

We based our analysis of the case study data on detailed site narratives prepared after each site visit. The narratives summarize and synthesize information collected from all respondents and other data sources. They include detailed descriptions of CERC planning, operations, and service delivery, as well as site visitors' observations and judgments about the relationship between CERC policies and procedures and the extent to

⁵We visited the Clarksville CERC on December 16-17, 2002; the Martinsville CERC on December 18-20, 2002; the South Boston CERC on January 22-24, 2003; and the Marion CERC on February 11-13, 2003.

⁶At the VEC, we interviewed the associate commissioner, director of field operations, and administrative services manager. At DSS, we interviewed the commissioner, manager of the Job Readiness and Employment Unit, and a regional director.

Table I.1: Site Visit Respondents

Respondent	Clarksville	Martinsville	South Boston	Marion
Virginia Employment Commission				
CERC Manager and VEC Director	X	X	X	X
CERC Supervisor		X		
Regional Director	X			
Workforce Services Representatives	X	X	X	X
WIA Coordinator			X	
WIA Case Manager	X	X	X	X
Office Services Specialist		X		
Department of Social Services				
Director	X	X	X	X
Assistant Director				X
Eligibility Supervisor	X	X		
Employment Services Supervisor		X		
VIEW Coordinator				X
Partnering Agencies				
Adult Basic Education		X		X
Area Agency on Aging		X	X	X
Child Support Enforcement		X		
Community Action Agency			X	X
Community College Representatives	X	X		X
Department of Rehabilitative Services	X			X
Experience Works		X		X
Faith-Based Service Providers			X	
Health Care Providers	X	X		X
Mental Health Care Providers	X	X		
United Way	X	X		
Local Government Officials				
Mayor	X	X		
CERC Customers				
	X	X		

which the CERCs were able to meet their goal of increasing access to a broad range of services. The concluding section of each narrative summarizes the CERCs' key successes and implementation challenges. We used the site narratives to conduct cross-site analyses that compared and contrasted operations, approaches to service coordination, and key implementation issues across the four CERCs.

Literature Review

To provide a broader research context for the study, we reviewed several recent studies that examined service integration through One-Stop centers and strategies for increasing access to food stamps and other work supports. In our review of these studies, we focused on examining key barriers to service integration in One-Stop centers that have been identified in prior research, as well as the promising strategies implemented to enhance service integration. A summary of barriers and strategies gleaned from the literature review is presented in Chapter II of this report.

Analysis of Administrative Data

In addition to deriving implementation lessons from the process analysis, this study aims to document the extent of service use by CERC customers and to examine patterns of service use and program participation in the CERC communities. To conduct this analysis, we obtained weekly reports on CERC activities from the VEC. These reports include the number of walk-in customers and telephone calls, sources of referrals to the CERCs, job placements made through the CERCs, and referrals made by the CERCs to partnering agencies. We aggregated these data into monthly counts of CERC customers and referrals and then examined the patterns of service use in the CERCs over time. In addition, we obtained data from DSS on levels of participation in the FSP, TANF, and the child care assistance program in the CERC communities. We report our findings in Chapter VI. ERS also requested data from the VEC on levels of service use prior to CERC implementation, but the agency was not able to provide this information.